

# Hindu Business Line

## A thumb's up for volunteer work

Date: 19/09/2011 | Edition: Delhi | Page: 6

### A thumb's up for volunteer work

**R**amanand (name changed) got a job on campus that brought him to Mumbai. The move also took him away from things that had enriched his school and college life.

What he missed most was teaching children at an orphanage back home. Luckily, he was introduced to one in Dharavi, where he started spending his Saturdays. When assigned to a project that demanded his presence in office on Saturdays, he placed a request to finish the same working overtime on weekdays, which was denied. Ramanand moved — to an employer who believed in Employee Supported Volunteering (ESV).



**Madhavi Lall**, Regional Head, HR, India & South Asia, Standard Chartered.

#### THE PAY-OFF

In her paper 'Making a Business Case for Employer Supported Volunteering' (2004), Linda Graff of Linda Graff and Associates, Canada, a consulting firm specialising in the space, argues how ESV benefits employees — on skill development, morale, motivation, job satisfaction, attitude towards employer, increase in income (over non-volunteers), and even good health.

For corporates, it is now well established that those perceived as socially responsible are not just preferred destinations for talent, they are also the choice of conscientious consumers. Quoting research by IBM and British Gas, Graff writes, "A reputation enhanced by corporate social performance can significantly improve a company's ability to attract and retain investors, customers and employees." She adds that employees whose employers support their involvement in the community 'are more loyal to their employer and stay longer'.

ESV as a concept is catching on in India too. A reflection of that is the Apeejay India Volunteer awards, announced by the Apeejay Surendra Group to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the UN's International Year of Volunteering. How, and why are companies lapping up ESV?

#### SPIKE IN JOB SATISFACTION

At Standard Chartered, employees clocked over 8,014 volun-

teering days in India in 2010. The 64,328 man hours recorded was a 570 per cent increase from the previous year. It also amounted to a contribution of \$2.42 million, according to Madhavi Lall, Regional Head, Human Resources — India and South Asia.

She says, "Employee volunteering is a core component of our bank's integrated community strategy. We believe that employee volunteering is good for communities, for our employees and for our business."

ESV was adopted in 2009 by Standard Chartered, which has over 7,650 employees in India. Seventy-four per cent of staff believe that employee volunteering increases job satisfaction and 81 per cent prefer working for a company supporting employee volunteering, adds Lall, quoting data from an internal survey in December 2010.

The number of employee volunteering days in 2011 is set to increase, with high-impact opportunities using core skills. A pilot is on with international NGO Global Giving. It involves staff volunteering to develop reports for grass roots-level projects.

Employees are also involved in providing financial literacy to over 2,000 adolescent girls in Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai.

#### INSIGHTS FROM VOLUNTEERING

Another organisation that is championing skill-based employee volunteering is IBM.

As part of IBM's centennial celebrations on June 15, a 'Celebration of Service Day' saw over 3 lakh employees spending 2.6 million hours of service at 5,000 activities, serving over 10 million people worldwide.

One of the company's flagship community programmes is Corporate Service Corps (CSC), where high-performing IBM employees provide technology-related assistance to local Governments and community organisations. Dr Chandrasekhar Sripada, Vice-President and Head of HR, India and South Asia, IBM, says, "Our experts have often gained valuable insights into the dynamics in emerging markets while carrying out community initiatives in the region. This improved understanding of the business dynamics has helped us offer more effective solutions to our customers."

#### VOLUNTEER JUNCTIONS

mjunction, which bills itself as India's largest eCommerce company, promotes ejunction, a trust created to spread eLiteracy and to create employability amongst the specially-abled and financially challenged.

Viresh Oberoi, Chairman of ejunction and Managing Director, mjunction Services, notes that 55 per cent of employees based in Kolkata, Jamshedpur, Chennai and Durgapur volunteer as trainers for a four-month basic computer course covering MS Office (Word, Excel, Powerpoint), Internet applications and communication skills. Among the incentives for employees to participate is the recognition of volunteering in the annual appraisal process.

Oberoi explains, "If there are two employees who have the same rating points, the company may give some preference to the one who has already contributed towards the company's Corporate Social Sustainability (CSS) initiatives."

Noting that the impact of ESV on employees and the organisation is not quantifiable, he adds: "We have seen a marked change in the attitude of freshers who come onboard. Having spent a considerable part of their college life busy with books and friends, they lose touch with some of the harsh realities of life. Volunteering for social causes reignites in them the spirit of giving and sharing."

Volunteering can also teach patience, which helps in customer interactions, according to Oberoi.

#### SUSTAINABLE RETENTION

HSBC's Corporate Sustainability (CS), which straddles positive impact on society and environment, is done through several activities including volunteerism, notes Malini Thadani, Head - Group Communications, Public Policy and Corporate Sustainability. At the beginning of the year, a Central Sustainability team in Mumbai charts out a customised volunteering plan with each business or function. Activities are spread out through the year in daily, weekly and fortnightly formats.

Thadani explains, "Using our employees to invest in the community helps to identify employer values and foster individual commitment. Corporate volunteers become more motivated and are likely to stay longer as volunteering increases employee morale and performance." According to Thadani, encouraging volunteering outside the '9 to 5' job helps employees become more innovative, respect differences and increases their self-confidence, thereby, fostering potential for long-term retention.

#### A GROWING TRIBE

More than 3,600 GMR staffers and family members spent 7,400 man hours in community development initiatives in 2010-11, says Meena Raghunathan, Director, Community Services, GMR Varalakshmi Foundation. At GMR too, performance appraisal factors in their involvement in such activities.

There are many more. Microsoft India has been running employee volunteering programmes for five years, taking a cue from volunteering programmes run globally for over 20 years now.

Organisations of all hues are on the ESV wagon. According to a senior HR manager, it marries the mandate for CSR activities with employee engagement, resulting in a win-win situation. But not many organisations can boast of having mapped ESV to retention or skill development with hard numbers. The problem arises with isolating the impact of ESV. For most, ESV is still a CSR-led activity that involves — and helps — HR, and not the other way round. But that's changing.



**Dr Chandrasekhar Sripada**, V-P and Head of HR, India and South Asia, IBM



**Malini Thadani**, Head - Group Communications, Public Policy and Corporate Sustainability, HSBC



**Viresh Oberoi**, Chairman, ejunction and Managing Director, mjunction Services